

GIVE UP MY RIGHTS?

9 Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are you not the fruit of my work in the Lord? ²If I am not an apostle to others, nevertheless [I am an apostle] to you; for by the Lord you are the proof of my apostleship.

³This is my defense to those who judge me. ⁴Do we not have the right to eat and drink? ⁵Do we not have the right to take [with us] a wife who is a sister [in the Lord], as do the other apostles and the Lord's brothers and Cephas? ⁶Or do only I and Barnabas not have the right to refrain from working [to support ourselves]? ⁷When did anyone [ever] serve as a soldier at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard, but does not eat of its fruit? Or who tends a flock, but does not drink of its milk? ⁸I do not say these things from [merely] a human standpoint. Does not the Law also say the same thing? ⁹In the Law of Moses it is written, "Do not muzzle an ox while it is threshing the grain." God is not concerned about oxen. ¹⁰On the contrary, without doubt he says this for our sake. It was written for our sake, because, when the plowman plows and [when] the thresher threshes, they ought to do so with the hope of sharing [in the harvest]. ¹¹If we have sown spiritual [seed] among you, is it too much if we reap a material harvest from you? ¹²If others have the right to receive financial support from you, do we not have a greater [right to do so]? But we did not make use of this right; on the contrary, we endure all things so that we may not in any way cause a hindrance to the gospel of Christ. ¹³Do you not know that those who perform the duties of the temple eat of the sacrifices [offered] at the temple, and those who serve at the altar partake of [the offerings sacrificed on] the altar? ¹⁴In the same way, the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should earn their living by [their] gospel [ministry].

¹⁵But I have not used any of these rights, and I have not written these things so that this might be done for me; for I would rather die—no one shall deprive me of my grounds for boasting! ¹⁶My preaching of the gospel is not any grounds for boasting, because there has been laid upon me a compulsion [to preach the gospel]. Woe is me if I do not preach the gospel. ¹⁷If I preach of my own free will, I have a reward; but if it is not of my own will, then it is a stewardship entrusted to me. ¹⁸What then is my reward? It is this: When I preach the gospel I present it free of charge, so that I do not make use of my right [as a preacher] of the gospel.

¹⁹Although I am free from all men, I make myself a slave to all, so that I might win the most [I can]. ²⁰Indeed, among the Jews I became like a Jew, in order that I might win the Jews. To those who are under the Law, I became like one who is under the Law—though I am not under the Law myself—in order that I might win those who are under the Law. ²¹To those who are without the Law I became like one who is without the Law—although I am not without the law of God, I am subject to the law of Christ—so that I might win those who are without the Law. ²²Among the weak I became weak, in order that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all men, in order that I might by all means save some. ²³I do all these things for the sake of the gospel, so that I may have a share in it. (1 Cor. 9:1-23)

Introduction

“Sometimes giving is easy,” a Christian lady writes. “Like when I give up something that means no great loss to me anyway.

“But seldom have I been so reminded of the hard side of giving as I am tonight. I am looking at slides of a summer mission project in which my son, Nick, participated. Through the slides we watch the weeks of work unfold: our teenagers digging trenches for water pipes; building a shed for the missionaries; teaching Vacation Bible School; being pals to the Navajo children who flocked to the church programs.

“Then come the slides that preach to me the sermon on giving up my rights. The first slide shows the last day of Vacation Bible School, with our teens handing out T-shirts to the little Navajo kids. ‘There were enough shirts for everyone except Herman,’ the narrator informs us. ‘We ran out of shirts before we got to him.’ Then ‘click,’ the next slide. It shows Nick standing with one bare arm around Herman as Herman proudly displays his new T-shirt. It is Nick’s basketball camp T-shirt, a prize he worked hard to earn just the week before leaving on this missionary trip. The narrator continues, ‘Nick took off his own shirt and gave it to Herman.’

“Forgive me, Lord, for giving when there’s no great loss on my part. Teach me to surrender, for the happiness of another, what could rightfully be called mine.” Such is the prayer of this Christian mother. (*POWER*, 10/21/90, p. 8)

Although we possess Christian rights and liberties, there are times and occasions when we may be called upon to relinquish those rights for the sake of Christ and His cause. In chapter 8 of 1st Corinthians, the Apostle Paul has spoken about a use of Christian liberty that is tempered and molded by Christian love. Now in chapter 9 he offers himself and his refraining from the use of his apostolic rights as an example to the Corinthians and to us.

When the situation requires it, let us be willing to give up even our rights—for the sake of Christ and for His cause.

I. Let Us be Willing to Give Up Our Rights, Even Though They are Our Rights (9:1-14)

By means of a series of rhetorical questions, Paul expresses the rights he possessed (vs. 1.) “*Am I not free?*” Here Paul is asking, “Do not I have Christian liberties and the right to exercise them, just as the Corinthians do?” “*Am I not an apostle?*” Was not Paul commissioned by Christ, and therefore, does he not possess the divinely given rights and privileges of an apostle? (Paul will go on to enumerate those rights in verses 4-5.)

In the event that someone would question his apostolic credentials, Paul adds the next two rhetorical questions: “*Have I not seen Jesus our Lord?*” The fact that the

Lord Jesus had personally revealed Himself to Paul on the road to Damascus (Acts 9) and commissioned him to be an apostle was evidence of Paul's rightful claim that he was an apostle and that he is equal to the original apostles. *"Are you not the fruit of my work in the Lord?"* The Corinthian church was the result of Paul's apostolic labors, a testimony that Christ had commissioned him and honored his work.

In verse 3 Paul declares, *"This is my defense to those who judge me."* Either he is referring to what he has just written in verses 1-2, his apostolic credentials, namely, the fact that he was personally commissioned by Christ, and his apostolic work was blessed by Christ, or he is referring to what he will write in the following verses in which he enumerates his apostolic rights and privileges. His point seems to be that if someone questions why he should receive the financial support of the church, his reply is that such support is one of his apostolic rights conferred upon him as one who is working for Christ.

By means of another series of rhetorical questions, Paul states the rights of the apostles that were bestowed upon them by Christ (vs. 4-6.) *"Do we not have the right to eat and drink?"* The apostles possessed the same rights to exercise Christian liberty as did the rest of the church. *"Do we not have the right to take with us a wife who is a sister [in the Lord]?"* Paul and Barnabas had the same right to marry as did the rest of the church and the other apostles. *"Do only I and Barnabas not have the right to refrain from working [to support ourselves]?"* Like the rest of the apostles, Paul and Barnabas had the right to abstain from secular employment so that they could devote themselves full-time to the work of the ministry.

Focusing especially on this right to the financial support of the church, Paul now demonstrates that it is a legitimate right (vs. 7-14.) Again, by means of rhetorical questions, Paul establishes the universally accepted fact that the laborer is entitled to receive benefit from his work: the soldier gets paid for his military service, and the tenant farmer gets a share of the harvest.

The principle Paul has presented in verse 7 is not only universally acknowledged by men, it is specifically stated in the Word of God (vs. 8-10.) Paul alludes to Deuteronomy 25:4, *"Do not muzzle an ox while it is threshing the grain."* As Deuteronomy makes clear, the law of God even applies this principle of just remuneration to the beasts of burden. As Paul goes on to explain, the Word of God states the principle of the laborer receiving recompense or reward for his work, *"because, when the plowman plows and when the thresher threshes, they ought to do so with the hope of sharing [in the harvest]."* There ought to be the confidence that one's labor is not in vain, and, indeed, there has been ordained by God the principle of a just reward for one's work.

The "goods and services" the apostle is providing—referring to himself and Barnabas, Paul writes, *"we have sown spiritual seed among you"*—is of far greater

value than the remuneration Paul has a right to expect in return. Thus he asks, *“Is it [too] much if we reap a **material harvest from you?**”* Paul, as the “founder” and nurturer of the Corinthian church, has a superior claim to their support, more than anyone who ministered to them in a more transient and less substantial way (vs. 12.) As we learn from the Book of Acts, he personally spent one and a half years ministering among them: *“Paul left Athens and went to Corinth ... ¹¹So Paul stayed for a year and a half, teaching them the word of God”* (Acts 18:1,11.) During the Old Testament era God ordained that the priests who served full time were entitled to receive part of the sacrifices as their “wages” (vs.13.) The Lord Jesus Himself ordained that the New Testament minister of the gospel should receive financial support for his gospel ministry (vs. 14.)

Paul thus establishes the case that he is an apostle, as such he possesses certain rights, and one of those rights is the right to the financial support of the church. Then, having established his legitimate claim, he goes on to write, *“But I have not used any of these rights”* (vs. 15.) Again, referring to himself and Barnabas, Paul declares, We did not use our right to financial support; *“on the contrary, we endure all things so that we may not in any way cause a hindrance to the gospel of Christ”* (vs.12b.)

When the occasion warrants it, let us be willing to give up our Christian rights, even though they are **our rights**. Some occasions that may warrant the relinquishing of our Christian rights would include those times when the unity of Christ’s church is at stake, those times when we have the opportunity to be an example of Christ-like love, or those times when the relinquishing of our Christian rights may be required for the sake of the gospel and its advancement (as was the case with Paul and Barnabas at Corinth.)

II. Let Us be Willing to Give Up Our Rights, for Jesus’ Sake (9:12b-23)

In verse 15 Paul testifies that at no time has he insisted upon his apostolic rights while ministering to the Corinthian church. Furthermore, he insists that he is not now writing in order to demand the exercise of his rights, especially the right to receive financial support. Indeed, he states that he would rather die than alter his policy of relinquishing his rights as he ministers to the Corinthian church. He is so adamant about refusing to receive financial support from the Corinthians that he breaks off his thought in mid-sentence, *“for I would rather die than [insist upon my right to receive financial support from you]—no one shall deprive me of my grounds for boasting!”*

The apostle is very zealous that no one should deprive him of his *“grounds for boasting;”* namely, the fact that he was never a burden to the Corinthian Christians and never received financial remuneration for his ministry among them. In verses 16-18 the apostle goes on to explain what he means. Paul’s preaching of the gospel is no source of boasting, or glorying, to him, (that is to say, it is no source of personal satisfaction and gratification,) because he is

compelled to preach the gospel—Paul cannot derive an intrinsic satisfaction from doing what he must do by necessity. If he voluntarily entered upon the gospel ministry he would have a “reward” from his preaching, he would have the satisfaction of doing what he wanted to do and what he freely chose to do. But, as the case is, Paul has been divinely commissioned and compelled to preach the gospel; he does not have a choice in the matter, a divine stewardship has been placed upon him. By way of illustration: It is like the difference between purchasing a farm, (knowing the work involved, but loving it and freely choosing to do it,) and having your neighbor entrust their farm to your care while they are away, (you are being required to do all the farm chores whether you like it or not.) In the former case you derive intrinsic satisfaction from the work itself, because it is something you want to do and freely choose to do, it is not a responsibility that is thrust upon you.

Paul **must** preach the gospel, he has no choice; so from where does he derive his boasting, or glorying, that is to say, his sense of satisfaction? Paul’s answer is that he derives his boasting (or, glorying) from the fact that he refrains from the use of his apostolic rights. He gains his sense of satisfaction from ministering to the Corinthians without the benefit of financial remuneration at their expense, as he expresses it, *“What then is my reward? It is this: When I preach the gospel I present it free of charge, so that I do not make use of my right [as a preacher of] the gospel”* (vs. 18.)

In verse 19 Paul presents to us his personal principle of Christian ministry and life: *“Although I am free from all men, I make myself a slave to all, so that I might win the most [I can.]”* Here is a willingness to relinquish his rights and privileges. Here is a willingness to submit to others and accept their terms. Here is a willingness to do all this for the sake of the gospel—for the sake of winning the greatest number of souls to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Note: When Christian truth was at stake, there was no compromise, as is evident from the episode that took place in the city of Antioch, involving the Apostle Peter:

... not even Titus, who was with me, was compelled to be circumcised, even though he was a Greek. ⁴[This whole matter arose] because of the false brothers who entered [the church] undetected, having “sneaked into [our fellowship]” in order “to spy on” our freedom that we have in Christ Jesus, so that they might make us “slaves.” ⁵[But] not even for a moment did we submit to them; [we resisted them] so that the truth of the gospel might remain with you. (Gal. 2:3-5)

Paul did not give in to the demand being made by “false brothers” that Titus, a Gentile convert, be circumcised in order to be saved—he stood firm for the biblical truth that we are saved by faith in Christ alone, not by any religious or

moral works we may perform. But when it was a matter of personal rights and liberties, Paul was ready to relinquish them when the occasion required.

In verses 20-22 Paul gives some examples of how this principle was applied to his life and ministry. When ministering to the Jews, he willingly subjected himself to the Old Testament ceremonial laws—so as not to unnecessarily offend the Jews (vs. 20.) But when ministering to the Gentiles, he did not insist on maintaining his Jewish customs—so as not to unnecessarily burden the Gentiles (vs. 21.) When fellowshiping with Christians who had many scruples of conscience, he abstained from the full use of his Christian liberties—so as not to cause them to stumble (vs. 22.) Paul explains, *“I do all these things for the sake of the gospel, so that I may have a share in it”* (vs. 23.) It is as though Paul views the gospel as being a divine enterprise, (a divine “business venture,”) one in which he desires to be a “stockholder” who shares in the dividends, as opposed to merely being a disinterested “worker.”

Let us be willing to give up our rights, for the sake of Christ and His gospel. Whereas most people seek to gain satisfaction by means of the full exercise of their rights, the Apostle Paul derived his satisfaction by refraining from the full exercise of his rights—for Jesus’ sake. May the Lord increasingly reproduce in us the same heart and mind He created in the Apostle Paul; indeed, may the Lord reproduce in us the very mind of Christ our Savior, of whom we read:

Have this mind in you that was also in Christ Jesus: ⁶existing in the form of God, he did not regard his being on an equality with God as a thing to be exploited; ⁷on the contrary, he emptied himself by taking the form of a servant. (Phil. 2:5-7a)

Conclusion

In the light of this passage of Scripture, may we understand that, although we possess Christian rights and liberties, there are times and occasions when we may be called upon to relinquish these rights out of love for Christ and the welfare of His church and for the cause of His gospel. By the grace of God, may this become a source of satisfaction to us, instead of being viewed as a burden we grudgingly bear. May we have the grace to make the same prayer as Nick’s mother: “Forgive me, LORD, for only giving when there is no great loss on my part. Teach me to surrender for the blessing and spiritual benefit of another, what could rightfully be called mine. Amen.”